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Get down to business with an architecture

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The message from the Office of Management and Budget to agency managers is loud and clear: No enterprise architecture, no funding.

"We're going to make real budget decisions based on analysis using the enterprise architecture," said Norman Lorentz, OMB's chief technology officer. "That's what makes [EA] relevant. In the past, these things have been shelfware. But trust me, that's not what the intention is now."

EA is an organizational blueprint that depicts how an agency's various IT and management elements work together as a whole. It shows the current environment and a targeted environment—and provides a road map for getting to the targeted environment. EAs inherently require constant examination and updating.

Agencies are making headway on EAs, OMB said in its 2004 budget analysis. But most of them have a long way to go.

In a report last year, the General Accounting Office found that only 13 percent of agencies surveyed had reached Stage 3 of EA maturity—actually developing architecture products.

But the biggest problem is that many agency EAs lack focus on business process and results, OMB says.

An enterprise architecture is "not just an IT thing anymore," said Lorentz. "You've got to do the business-process work first. That's the key. You've got to figure out what the expected outcomes are and then line up the technology."

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At the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, IT architect Ira Grossman couldn't agree more.

Visualization tools show "the linkage between the strategic plan, the mission and the business processes of the department," NOAA's Ira Grossman says. (Image By: J. Adam Fenster)

EAs "really aren't for the IT community," said Grossman, chairman of the Commerce Department's enterprise-architecture affinity group. "The real users are on the business and strategic planning end. Yes, IT does use it but if it stops at IT, it has not been totally successful."

Building an architecture for an agency as large and multifarious as Commerce is no mean feat. Grossman knows all about that.

The department formally embarked on its EA effort in late 1999 when it formed an agencywide architecture affinity group.

For the most part, the group's EA representations have used a cumbersome text-document format in Corel WordPerfect that makes labyrinthine architectures largely impenetrable for most users, Grossman said.

It's no wonder, then, that "people don't understand enterprise architectures," he added.

The department is looking to migrate to visual modeling software for its enterprise architecture. NOAA and the Census Bureau have been piloting such a tool, Metis from Computas Inc. of Sammamish, Wash. Grossman used Metis to integrate NOAA's 118 different observing systems into a single architecture.

An EA visualization tool "graphically shows the linkage between the strategic plan, the mission and the business processes of the department," Grossman said. "Going from the serial text documents to very graphically depicted architectures is a world of difference."

A visualization tool using XML will provide four different views of the department's architecture—business process, data/information, applications and technology infrastructure. And it can graphically depict the relationships among those elements.

"It provides an enterprise business model that the budgeting shop, the strategic planners and the executive managers can use," he said. "Everybody in the department [can access the model] for the level of knowledge that they need to make decisions."

Using a graphically rich visualization format also will make it easier to engage stakeholders across the department in the enterprise architecture process.

"The buy-in has to be there," Grossman said. "You have to bring in your chief financial officers and your strategic planners. Right now they don't get it because they don't understand it. It's just too difficult for them. That's why graphical representation is so

exciting."

Getting agency CFOs on board is especially crucial to shifting the focal point of EAs to business processes.

For OMB's Lorentz, there's one thing for managers to keep foremost in mind when developing an enterprise architecture: "It's a business tool."

You must remember this

- It's not an IT thing. You need it, yes, and you will use it. But it's a business tool that exists mostly for business and strategic planning.
- Because an EA shows the current environment and a targeted environment, it's important to have a software visualization tool, preferably making use of XML, that graphs the links between a strategic plan, mission and business processes.
- Such a tool can be very helpful in getting perhaps the most important ingredient in an enterprise architecture: buy-in by stakeholders from the top down.